

## The General's Passing

Yvonne Cloutier woke to the sounds of crying, sobbing coming from her father's bedroom. She had retreated across the hall into another room to rest after sitting with her mother and father until well after midnight.

She realized the house was still very dark, apparently not much time had passed. Pulling her robe on, she walked back across the hall into her father's room. Her mother sat next to the bed holding his hand, her head resting on his arm. Yvonne knew.

Hearing a voice call out, she left the room and walked down the hall to the bottom of the stairway. Her husband stood at the top.

"Is everything alright?"

Yvonne shook her head. "My father is gone."

Gerard gripped tight to the railing, slowly making his way down the stairs, finally reaching her. Pulling her close he let her sob into his shoulder, softly rubbing her back.

"I am so sorry."

Yvonne pulled away, holding him at arms length.

"Thank you Gerard, you are so kind. But, as you know, we have much to do now. Will you make the calls?"

Gerard nodded. Yvonne left him standing at the bottom of the stairs and walked briskly back to her father's room. The room had been set up for her father on the first floor to avoid the stairs. She entered what once was a formal sitting room, but now furnished like a hospital suite.

The room she had been resting in, normally used as one of the visitor rooms, equipped with a Davenport, three side chairs, a couple of tables and various amenities. She had been taking refuge there for the last several nights. Waiting with her mother. Her husband had remained upstairs in his bedroom. This was the first time he had come down the stairs in over two weeks and his doctors were still discussing another surgery as his recovery was not going well.

Walking toward the bed, she helped her mother up softly patting her father's hand and guided her mother from the bedroom into the room she had been using, explaining what would be coming next. As a high ranking French Officer, *Général de corps d'armée*, there were certain traditions to follow. She encouraged her mother to go upstairs to freshen up and prepare for the onslaught about to descend on their house.

Within the hour, the villa swarmed with French officers of every rank. Two women officers arrived and proceeded up the stairs to her mother's room to console her and prepare her to face the parade of people who would be passing through. Her husband's death was a major event and the press already started to gather on the front lawn. Although, this was still the middle of the night.

Yvonne had been able to slip away to freshen up herself and was back downstairs accepting the arriving crowd. She had brought down a set of clothes for her husband, who was now dressed in his uniform and doing the greeting

inside the front door. French officers of every rank offered their condolences and stressed they were there for what ever may be needed in the coming days.

The one call Yvonne had made from her bedroom was to Simone. She arrived with Damien, right in the middle of the officer cavalcade filling the once quiet house. Simone hugged Yvonne for several minutes allowing her to grieve in private. Damien also hugged her as well, but in a polite society way.

Simone convinced Yvonne to go back upstairs where she helped her remove her dress and guided her into different clothes. Simone also worked on Yvonne's face and hair. Yvonne's attempt had been hampered by lack of sleep and lack of focus. Simone reminded her cameras would be flashing with every move she made, so the effect was prudent to look. Well, to look this way now.

Yvonne smiled as they made their way back downstairs. She spotted her husband standing off to the side talking with a group of junior officers. He smiled and waved to her as she worked her way into the main room where the more senior officers were gathering. In the middle was her mother, quite elegant, with one of the two women officers standing next to her, both comforting her and translating French to Vietnamese and vice versa for her.

The crowd continued to grow. Unbeknownst to Yvonne or her mother, the General's body had already been removed and transported to be prepared for a ceremonial funeral.

The room grew quiet as another obviously key senior officer arrived. Everyone seemed to snap to attention at his presence. This officer was only one of two men outranking her father. He walked straight over to her mother and offered his condolences.

Afterward, the officer walked toward Yvonne. Somehow Gerard, in his uniform, made his way to her side. The senior officer took her hand, patting it gently between his as he spoke softly to her offering his condolences and explaining to her everything was being taken care of and she need not worry about one detail. He nodded toward Lieutenant Gerard, but just as quickly turned to leave. A few of the more senior officers fell in behind him and left as well. Their job done here.

One of the other senior officers started to gather the others and motioned toward the front door directing the group to leave. One by one the officers offered their condolences to her mother and Yvonne as they left. A couple of the men patted Gerard on the shoulder as they shook his hand. As quickly as the crowd had arrived they were gone.

Simone stood next to Yvonne. Damien was entertaining a morning cocktail off to the side. Gerard slipped back to lean on a post and her mother stood silent in the middle of the room. Yvonne went to her guiding her to a chair. The family members serving the house called them in to have breakfast and have morning coffee. Since light was coming up over the veranda, they all decided to gather out there in the morning breeze.

The next few days were a blur. All the pomp and circumstance for her father's, *Général de corps d'armée*, funeral was a bit overwhelming. Yvonne and

her mother were dragged from one event to another. Fortunately for them, Simone and Damien were with them every step of the way offering guidance and support and running interference when needed.

A French Colonel came by the villa at the end of the week and started discussions regarding their need to vacate the villa. He explained another officer had been promoted to her father's position and he and his family would be expecting to move into the villa within the week.

Yvonne smiled. This was not the first time they had been forced to vacate her father's residence. She listened to the officer start to explain the procedures, but quickly stopped him.

"My husband, Gerard Cloutier, shall make all the arrangements. I plan to sail before then and bring my mother home."

The officer stopped and looked up at her, quickly to her husband, then back to her.

"I do not understand."

Yvonne stood up and paced the room.

"This house is a government house, we were occupants. My mother's home is back in our country, back in Hanoi. We have already made arrangements to bring her back there immediately following my father's passing. Housing has already been arranged there as well. It is what I intend to do."

She looked at the officer for a brief moment, then toward her husband.

"Gerard will make all the arrangements to vacate the villa. You will coordinate all further discussions with him. The details are not important to me or my mother. This was my father's, The General's, residence. I'm sure you can understand. Anything further regarding this place should be discussed with my husband. I must make preparations now for our trip. If you'll excuse me."

Yvonne walked out of the room, a devious smile on her face. Certainly, happy to be rid of another chore.

Later that night, Yvonne and Gerard were in her bedroom. He sat on the chair next to the window as the soft breeze ruffled the curtains. She was busy changing into her night clothes. He watched her prance around the room in various states of dress and undress, admiring her as he had always done. He stood and walked toward her, motioning for her to take a seat on the divan, he sat down next to her.

"Yvonne we must talk."

Yvonne looked over at him pulling her robe closed, but since she had nothing underneath, there was little point since the robe left little to the imagination.

"My dear Gerard, I have confidence you will do a fine job of taking care of everything here." She swept her hand in the air.

"It is not what I wish to talk about." Gerard sighed.

Yvonne got up and walked toward the closet before returning wearing a pair of men's pajamas.

"I have grown accustomed to sleeping in these since I have spent so much time downstairs lately. Thank you for loaning them to me."

She sat down next to him bracing her back against the wall.

"What is so important you wish to talk about?"

Gerard sat forward turning to face her head on.

"I worry you will not come back after you take your mother home."

"What ever do you mean?" Yvonne spoke softly.

Gerard lowered his head, before raising it slightly.

"Now you have nothing to return to. I worry there may be no reason for you to ever come back to Paris. I know your father was the only reason keeping you here in Paris, in France, and now he is gone."

Yvonne put her hand on his leg.

"I am not society. I was only society because of my father's stature. I have no place here. Nor do I want one. My country is my home. I hope you can understand."

"I do, but where will it leave me?" Gerard nodded. "Where will it leave us? As you know, I have been unsuccessful in obtaining a post in Hanoi. Or anywhere in country for that matter. What shall become of me here without you? I have this fear I will not see you again once you leave."

Yvonne stood up, pulling him up with her. She placed her arms around his shoulder and kissed him gently on the lips.

"I will come back to you, if it is what you want me to do. You are my husband. I shall honor my father's wishes and be your wife."

Gerard pulled away.

"That is what I mean. I know you married me because your father arranged it. Not because of me. Especially, since I am unable to perform my husbandly duty. You are a beautiful woman. You can have whatever you want. I am sure, me, in my condition is not what you would want."

He bowed his head and sat hard on the divan. Yvonne sat down next to him, holding his hand. He looked up briefly, but bowed his head again.

"Please tell me what is worrying you so?" Yvonne held his hand tighter.

Finally, he looked up at her, placing his other hand over hers.

"You know what the doctors said? They said they need to go in again, but the damage is pretty severe, and will only get worse and at some point they won't be able to operate anymore."

Yvonne put her arms around him, holding him close.

"I know, Gerard. I know what they said the last time they went in. But, you are not getting better. You need to try. You need to let the doctors operate again."

He held onto her as he talked.

"Some of the officers I know, have suggested I give up my service. Resign my post and live my life without further obligation." He paused taking a breath. "If I did resign I could join you in Hanoi and we could be together without

restriction. But, I would have no income. No means of supporting us. No way to provide for us. It is a terrible burden to carry with such a decision."

"Would you ever consider resigning?" Yvonne pushed back.

"I thought I might try once more to get a post in Hanoi. With the proviso if I didn't I could resign and be done with the military altogether."

Yvonne pulled away and stood up, pacing a bit.

"Would it be so bad an idea? Show them you mean business and either give you a post or else you'll resign. Could you live with the decision?"

He stood up next to her.

"You know I would do anything to be with you."

"Then it is what you shall do. I will wait for you in Hanoi. I can be home with my family and you can join us there. What about your family?"

He waved his hand in the air.

"I shall ask them to join us in Hanoi. With the French resettling the country, it should not be a problem and will be able to do so now.

"I am not so sure." Yvonne smiled. "With both my mother and your parents there, we may have to move away."

He put his arms around her and let his hand slip to her breast through the pajama top. Slowly he worked his hand inside and cupped her bare breast.

"I am so sorry I can not do more. I am sorry I can not be more of a husband to you. This pains me so. To know you have needs I can not satisfy."

Yvonne hugged him tighter without responding.

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Simone was there bright and early to help her and her mother pack for the trip back to Hanoi. Simone was curious as to why Yvonne was leaving so many garments behind.

Yvonne explained she wouldn't be needing those types of garments anymore. Simone grabbed her by the shoulders and faced her.

"You're not coming back are you?"

Yvonne shook her head no.

"What about your husband, Gerard?"

Yvonne pulled away.

"We have discussed it and he is working on a solution."

"Which is?" Simone turned her back around.

Yvonne explained how Gerard would try once again for a post in Hanoi. But if unsuccessful, he would consider resigning.

"So you're really not coming back ever?" Simone sighed.

"I will never say never." Yvonne smiled.

"Well, then we will just have to come visit you there." Simone let go.

Yvonne smiled again. Simone continued to pack her things.

"Can I ask you one more question?"

Yvonne nodded, but responded first.

"Yes. But, I do not know the answer to Sinclair Langdon yet."

"You will tell me when you do?" Simone nodded.

Yvonne nodded back.

Together they continued to pack up her clothes for the trip. A little bit later they both walked into her mother's room. Her mother had not done much in the way of packing. Simone quickly took charge, arranging and loading items into the trunk as well as the small bags. Not surprisingly, her mother did not have much in the way of clothes and her packing was finished quickly.

The three women went downstairs to the breakfast room. Although the hour was late morning, they all had breakfast dishes and sat there for the next three hours just talking with Yvonne translating as necessary. There were a few smiles on her mother's face, but mostly there was sadness.

Yvonne, her mother and Gerard had an early dinner in the same room a few hours later. And would be their last meal together as the ship sailed at midnight.

After she got her mother to bed, Yvonne joined her husband in his bedroom. She removed all her clothes and climbed into his bed with him. Together they lay there holding each other.

At 10:30 pm Yvonne climbed out of bed. But, told Gerard to stay there. It would be better this way. He did not. Standing at the top of the staircase, he saw the men carry out their luggage to the car and watched as Yvonne turned and nodded to him. The front door closed.

The big front door quickly reopened. Yvonne appeared. She kissed her hand and waved it in the air. He did the same.

The door closed once again.

Gerard stood on the landing for quite some time. When he believed the car had gone and Yvonne would not be coming back, he slowly returned to his bedroom and sat heavily down onto his bed.

The General has passed on.

Yvonne and her mother have left the house, Paris, France, heading home.

The big house sat very quiet.

He did not know where the servants were or even if they were still here.

Tomorrow he would contact the French colonel about vacating the villa.

He would move in with his parents until such time he could find a place.

No more thinking tonight. He needed his rest.

Only one question remained.

Would he ever see Yvonne again.